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Citation for published version:

Sinclair, F 1995, 'Sacrifice, suppression, subversion: Redefining the feminine in the *Enfants-Cygnés* epics', *Olifant*, vol. 20, pp. 33–61. <<http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/olifant/article/view/19494/25614>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Olifant

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Suppression, Sacrifice, Subversion:
Redefining the Feminine in the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*

The *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, the *Chevalier au Cygne* and the *Fin d'Elias* form an epic trilogy which serves as a retrospective introduction to the *Crusade Cycle*, the three *chansons de geste* having been produced later than the main corpus of the Cycle, in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.¹ Their focus on the story of the Chevalier au Cygne and the birth of his daughter, Ida, mother to Godefroi de Bouillon, provides an ancestral lineage for Godefroi, leader of the First Crusade and first Christian king of Jerusalem, but also produces a trilogy of epics with their own narrative coherence. A further element which serves to separate the three from the subsequent epics of the *Crusade Cycle* is their drawing on mythological topoi to provide the basis for their account of the Chevalier au Cygne's birth. Although functioning as a prelude to the *Crusade Cycle*, the *Chevalier au Cygne* epics cannot therefore be read as bound within a specifically epic context. The inheritance of themes and motifs from myth and folklore is particularly evident in the first of the trilogy, the *Naissance*. This generic interplay does not, however, serve to destabilise our reading of the narrative as an epic to any great extent. Despite the presence of folkloric motifs, our horizon of expectation is not overtly troubled, as the transition of the tale into its epic form sets the characters in a twelfth-century narrative frame which moulds them to its own desires and expectations.²

This paper focuses on the female characters of the *Naissance* and on the ways in which their epic framing limits or suppresses the role which they play in the folktale. It is the transformation of these characters which most evidently illustrates the shift between generic

¹ For details of the *chansons de geste* comprising the *Crusade Cycle* see *Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises: Le Moyen Age* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1993), and Geoffrey M. Myers's introduction to *The Old French Crusade Cycle*, Vol. 1: *La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, edited by Emanuel J. Mickel Jnr. and Jan A. Nelson (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977). All future references to *The Crusade Cycle* will be to this volume. For an analysis of some of the elements serving to link the disparate epics into a more coherent cycle see D.A. Trotter, 'L'ascendance mythique de Godefroi de Bouillon et le Cycle de la Croisade', in *Métamorphose et bestiaire fantastique au moyen âge*, edited by Laurence Harf-Lancner (Paris: Ecole Normale Supérieure, 1985), pp. 107-35.

² For the term 'horizon of expectation' see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982).

norms and the differing significance of women in the two forms of narrative. Although the depiction of the *chanson de geste* characters may be seen as a closing down of the possibility for active female participation in the tale, there does, as I will show, remain a certain ambiguity in their representation.

The dual nature of the *chanson de geste* is reflected by its differing titles: the *Enfants-Cyignes*, or the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*.³ The title *Enfants-Cyignes*, attributed by Gaston Paris, emphasises the *chanson*'s link with the myth or legend of supernatural swan-children which exists in Slavic, Germanic, and Irish traditions, among others.⁴ As pointed out by Jan A. Nelson:

That the story of the swan-children is an independent tale totally disassociated from the Swan Knight legend is well attested by its appearance in Germanic folk tradition. [...] Its later attachment to the Swan Knight legend is the result of the presence of swans in the tale. They undoubtedly suggested to the poet its possible use as an explanation of the origin of the Swan Knight.⁵

The supernatural origin of the Chevalier au Cygne is not, therefore, an intrinsic feature of the Old French *chanson de geste*, but a result of its grafting onto the pre-existing myth of metamorphic swan-children, a link acknowledged by Paris. The alternative title, the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne*, underscores the epic nature of the tale, its internarrative connection to the rest of the Cycle, and the literary aim inherent in its composition, that of establishing the genealogical identity of the Chevalier au Cygne as ancestor of Godefroi de Bouillon.⁶ The *Enfances-Cyignes/Naissance* (hereafter referred to as the *Naissance*) exists in two separate Old French versions, *Elioxe* and *Beatrix*.⁷ *Elioxe* is probably the earlier of the versions, and is that which retains the closest relationship to the folktale.⁸ The *Beatrix* version takes a further step

³ See *The Crusade Cycle*, Introduction, p. lxxxxi.

⁴ As indicated in the Introduction to *The Crusade Cycle*, p. lxxxxi. See also Jeanne Lods, 'L'utilisation des thèmes mythiques dans trois versions écrites de la légende des enfants-cyignes', in *Mélanges offerts à René Crozet* (Poitiers: Société d'Etudes Médiévales, 1966), pp. 809-20 (p. 809). For further relevant studies of the Chevalier au Cygne epics by the same author see 'Encore la légende des enfants-cyignes: version courtoise et version pseudo-épique, étude de style', in *Mélanges Rita Lejeune* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1969), Vol. 2, pp. 1227-44, and 'La fin du Chevalier au Cygne', in *Mélanges offerts à Jean Frappier* (Geneva: Droz, 1970), Vol. 2, pp. 659-82.

⁵ The Introduction to *The Crusade Cycle*, p. lxxxxi.

⁶ This title was attributed to the epic by H.A. Todd. See *The Crusade Cycle*, Introduction, p.lxxxxi.

⁷ The editions of *Elioxe* and of *Beatrix* referred to throughout comprise Vol. 1 of *The Crusade Cycle*. All quotations are from the *Elioxe* version unless otherwise stated.

⁸ As pointed out by Lods, the mythological influences on *Elioxe* and *Beatrix* are more complex than this order of composition may imply. It is also debatable as to whether the author of *Beatrix* did in fact know the *Elioxe*, and drew upon this, or whether he was influenced solely by the oral forms of the tale. See Lods, 'L'utilisation des thèmes mythiques', pp. 809-20.

away from this, introducing structural alterations which emphasise the role of the Chevalier au Cygne as an epic hero. The narrative prominence of the Chevalier throughout *Beatrix* has two important consequences. Firstly, it produces a tale which is more emphatically bound to the following *chansons de geste* of the cycle, and secondly, it privileges the male hero over the female characters, who play a more significant part in the action of the folktale and in *Elioxe*. Owing to this increase in the epic character of the tale, *Beatrix* is viewed by David Trotter as providing the more appropriate introduction to the *Crusade Cycle* as a whole.⁹

Elioxe is thus the version of the *Naissance* which is most evidently a tale in transition, interweaving folktale material and the themes and concerns of the twelfth-century epic. This is not, however, an unproblematic synthesis. Instead, the epic is opened up to layering and division. Although having an overall narrative coherence, the poem can be split into two separate sections, the first being modelled primarily on the myth of the swan-children (ll. 1-2932), and the second (ll. 2933-3499), after the retransformation of the children into human form, showing greater affinity with epic tradition. This second section focuses more emphatically on themes of male lineage, inheritance, and conquest, to the detriment of the female characters, who disappear from the tale. *Elioxe* will form the basis of this study, since this is the version of the *Naissance* which most clearly reveals the redundancies and ambiguities produced by the intergeneric transition of the female characters.

The shift in narrative form from myth to late twelfth-century epic caused much of the supernatural element of the original tale to be lost. Possibly this was now viewed as irrelevant or inappropriate to the story of the Chevalier au Cygne as ancestor of Godefroi de Bouillon, although *Elioxe* in particular is still imbued with a definite supernatural ethos.¹⁰ A brief summary of the plot will illustrate this mythological influence:

⁹ Trotter, 'L'ascendance mythique', p. 119.

¹⁰ The mythological elements of the swan-children tale may have proved too pagan by association, the story subsequently undergoing a 'Christianisation', i.e. a purging of its more obviously supernatural and magical elements, in order to render it more appropriate as precursor of the legend of the Christian kings of Jerusalem, of whom Godefroi de Bouillon was the first. Trotter views this as particularly the case in regard to the actual metamorphosis of the swan-children: 'c'est dans ces épisodes que réside la plus grande difficulté, le noyau païen du récit qu'il faut camoufler tant bien que mal' ('L'ascendance mythique', p. 110). See G. Huet, 'Sur quelques formes de la légende du Chevalier au Cygne', *Romania*, 34 (1905), 206-14 (p. 210) for details of modifications which serve to distance the later, literary versions of the epic from the primitive elements of the earlier tale.

King Lothair loses his way in a forest whilst out hunting and falls asleep by a fountain. When he awakens he encounters Elixie, whose hand he requests in marriage. Elixie predicts that she will give birth to septuplets —six boys and a girl— and will die in the process. One of the boys will become a great king, extending the lineage to the Orient. The marriage takes place, despite opposition from Matrosilie, mother of Lothair, and Elixie's prediction comes true. As Lothair is absent in combat at the time of the birth, Matrosilie orders that the seven infants be taken into the forest and abandoned. She informs Lothair that his wife gave birth to seven serpents who poisoned Elixie fatally before flying away. Meanwhile, the children are raised by a hermit in the forest, but Matrosilie comes to know of their existence and of the fact that they each wear a gold chain (found around their necks at birth). She sends a servant to steal the chains, but he only succeeds in snatching those of the male children, who immediately transform into swans and fly away. Their sister leaves the hermit's dwelling and makes her way to Lothair's city, where she encounters the swans, who recognise her and allow her to feed them. This is brought to the attention of Lothair, who feels a strange affinity with the birds, but who has been unable to approach them. He learns the story of the swan-maiden and returns to question Matrosilie. She confesses her deception, relinquishing all save one of the gold chains, which has been melted down. Lothair pardons her and returns the chains to five of the swans, who regain human form and are accepted by Lothair as his sons. The five grow to manhood and are knighted with great ceremony. They each then leave upon a separate quest, the Chevalier au Cygne being accompanied by the brother who still remains a swan.

Although this summary indicates the continuing importance of the supernatural in the *chanson de geste*, it does not reveal the extent to which the representation of character has undergone significant changes in the transition from folktale to epic. As mentioned above, this is particularly so in regard to the female characters of *Elixie*. Their roles differ considerably in emphasis and importance when plotted through from the folktale to *Elixie*, then to *Beatrix*, especially when viewed in relation to the role of the principal male protagonist, the Chevalier au Cygne, or, as he is named in *Beatrix*, Elias. The female character whose significance to the narrative undergoes the most radical alteration is the swan-maiden. In the folktale the girl, who remains nameless, serves as the heroic focus of the story, the action centring on and

evolving around her. She redeems her six brothers from their fate of remaining forever as swans by performing a task which may be carried out by her alone, and which is characterised as particularly feminine in nature, such as sewing or weaving.¹¹ The tale is linked to the solar and earth-goddess myths of constant renewal and rebirth, as the girl in turn bears seven children —six boys and a girl— capable of transforming themselves at will into swans, and the whole action is repeated.¹²

Although in *Elioxe* the potential importance of the swan-maiden is marked by her gender (the sole female among six brothers) and by the narrative's initial lack of distinction between the male swan-children, she is not the hero or the ultimate focus of the tale. Instead, the girl merely functions as a catalyst in the resolution of the narrative's problem. Her presence at the riverside and her recounting of her story to Lothair (ll. 2672-2703) are sufficient to set the scene for the tale's *dénouement*. In *Elioxe* the swan-maiden performs no particular 'feminine' task to save her brothers. In place of any such redemptive action she is revealed as entirely lacking in the supernatural insight of her predecessors. When she does encounter the enchanted swans (ll. 2418-33) this is depicted as a chance occurrence and she fails to recognise them as her brothers. It is the children's father, King Lothair, who performs the decisive action which frees his sons, regaining the gold chains from Matrosilie (ll. 2804-40) and returning them to the swan-children:

Li rois a pris la tierce caaine de l'or mier,
 Li tiers oisiaus se laise molt bien aplanoier,
 Et il li gete el col sans plus de l'atargier;
 Ausi avint cestui con il fust au premier. (ll. 2916-19)

The active potential of the swan-maiden is not, therefore, fulfilled in the *chanson de geste*. In place of a character imbued with a particular force or talent which dictates the evolution of the narrative, in *Elioxe* we find a swan-maiden who is as powerless as her brothers. This reduction of the swan-children to a basic homogeneity, despite the gender of the child who remains human, negates the importance and power which the girl is seen to possess in the folktale. The

¹¹ See, for example, 'The Six Swans', in Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm and others, *German Fairy Tales*, edited by Helmut Brackert and Volkmar Sander (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1985), pp. 113-18. Here the swan-maid must sew six shirts of starwort in order to effect the transformation of her brothers into human form (p. 116).

¹² For details of earth-goddess beliefs see Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Penguin Books, 1993). The same symbolic representation of the regenerative cycle may be seen in many myths, including that of Demeter and Persephone.

swan-maiden of *Elioxe* becomes a neutral cipher whose gender is in fact totally irrelevant to the narrative context, owing to her lack of any decisive action which may be gendered as 'feminine'. The fact that she is depicted as female is retained solely as a relic of the mythological origins of the poem.

The return of the swan-children to human form (ll. 2909-32) marks the poem's shift from a mythical to an epic focus. The emphasis upon the fey and the *merveilleux* cedes to the Christian supernatural, the transformation of the children now being depicted as miraculous rather than magical: '[Dieu] par miracle fait la cose ensi cangier' (l. 2915). The children themselves give thanks to God:

Longes avons esté, bels frere, peneant,
Et Damedex nos a faite merci si grant
Par le main cest pseudome que veés ci seant;
Mercions damedeu, le pere tot puissant
Et cel pseudome la, molt me sanble vaillant (ll. 2935-39)

God and the 'pseudome' (Lothair) are linked together as saviours of the enchanted children, Lothair acting as God's instrument in a resolution which lacks any notion of female power or influence. The sacred and the secular are fused in the persona of the king, emblem of the world of the twelfth-century epic, and it is he who takes narrative precedence.¹³ The concerns of the poem are now emphatically bound within a social context which emphasises Christianity and the need to extend the boundaries of the Christian kingdom, together with the masculine concerns of patrilinear succession and inheritance. Lothair's words indicate his sons importance as heirs, together with his daughter's importance as a means of forging alliance and extending the social and political network.¹⁴

Por cou wel jo prover, vos estes mi enfant,
Vos manrés avoes moi, des rices fiés tenant,
Car jo tieng cest roïame, si l'ai en mon conmant:
.VII. cités et .L. castels segnerilmant.
Si serés cavalier et mi ami aidant,
Et jou marierai ma fille hautement,

¹³ For an analysis of these two royal roles see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹⁴ The function of women as the means of creating relationships between men in a society which is homosocial to the exclusion of women is reflected in *Elioxe*. See Susan Aronstein, 'Prize or Pawn?: Homosocial Order, Marriage and the Redefinition of Women in the "Gawain Continuation"', *Romanic Review*, 82 (1991), 115-26, which treats the romance use of women as political and economic 'pawns' to establish bonds between men by marriage. For further discussion of the concept of homosocial society see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Soit a roi u a prince u duc u amirant;
Si arai des nevels, s'ierent mi bien aidant. (ll. 2974-81)

As noted above, the importance of the swan-maiden's gender is considerably reduced in *Elioxe*. It is at the point of the poem's transition from a predominant mythological influence to a predominant epic one that her sex does, however, become significant. Instead of functioning as neutral and placing her on a par with her brothers in the narrative's scheme of gender power relations, the girl's sex now marks her difference. In the context of the social and chivalric world of the epic her female gender negates any notion of her as a player, even a nominal one, in the action and she disappears from the narrative.¹⁵

If the swan-maiden appears disempowered in *Elioxe*, her role in the *Beatrix* version of the *Naissance* is even more rigorously curtailed. This account of the metamorphosis draws the poem more closely into line with the following *Chevalier au Cygne* epics, through the depiction of the swan-maiden simply as one of the six children who are transformed into swans. The child who retains human form in this case is Elias, the *Chevalier au Cygne* himself, who becomes the hero of the tale and instigator of its action, an alteration perceived by Gaston Paris as 'une innovation voulue, toute médiévale'.¹⁶ An analysis of the differences between the two versions of the *Naissance* cannot be covered here, but the overall effect of the replacement of the swan-maiden by her brother in *Beatrix* is to give a more emphatically masculine focus to the whole poem. This masculine emphasis ties *Beatrix* more tightly into the genealogical framework of the epic cycle. The *Chevalier au Cygne* takes narrative precedence as the first significant ancestor of Godefroi de Bouillon from the very inception of the hero's lineage, a shift which conforms to the epic topos of a genealogy based on male-male relationships.¹⁷

¹⁵ In regard to the use of women to establish bonds between men in a male homosocial system, Aronstein states: 'Once these bonds have been established, women can be eliminated from any further narrative or political action' ('Prize or Pawn?', p. 126). In a similar way the swan-maiden may be eliminated from *Elioxe* once her brothers have been established in the social and political order.

¹⁶ Gaston Paris, 'La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne', *Romania*, 19 (1890), 314-40 (p. 323).

¹⁷ For details of theories on the genealogical structure of the Old French *chansons de geste* see R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Sarah Kay, *The 'Chansons de geste' in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); and Michael Heintze, *König, Held und Sippe: Untersuchungen zur Chanson de geste des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts und ihrer Zyklenbildung* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1991).

It is relevant to note the existence of a rather later Spanish version of the *Naissance*, *Isomberte*, from which the character of the female swan-child has disappeared completely, leaving a tale of seven male siblings.¹⁸ This would seem to reinforce a reading of the twelfth-century *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne* which interprets the presence of a female protagonist among the swan-children as a mythological relic. The more the story becomes influenced by the aims of epic narrative, and the later the version, the more the role of the female swan-child (originally the hero) is diminished and her character suppressed.

This suppression appears notably in the final section of *Elixo* (ll. 3028-3499), which is devoted to the establishing of Lothair's sons as his heirs, their knighting, and their departure in quest of adventure and conquest:

Li .V. fil roi Lotaire, des autres ne sai quans,
Sont assemblé ensamble, s'ont fait uns parlemans
Que cascuns ira querre, sans compaignie de gans,
Aventure qui soit a cascun convenans. (ll. 3332-35)

Their mother's prophecy is thus fulfilled. More importantly, the context for the heroic deeds of the Chevalier au Cygne has been established. As stated by the narrator:

Des .IIII. ne dirons or ne tant ne quant,
Mais des .II. vos irons un poi amentevant,
Del cisne qui la nef vait a son col traiant,
Et del gentil vallet dedens sa nef gisant. (ll. 3481-84)

This comment opens up the way for the second epic of the cycle, the *Chevalier au Cygne*, which concentrates on the adventures of the Chevalier au Cygne alone. Although the Chevalier's origins are here acknowledged as supernatural, the predominant aim and theme of the second poem is the establishment of a heroic lineage and an inheritance extending from the Chevalier au Cygne to his grandson, Godefroi de Bouillon. The epic cycle is thus begun. Its emphasis on the construction of a genealogy worthy of the Christian king of Jerusalem produces a narrative form which is partly defined by its preoccupation with a chronology and a linearity which can in turn be defined as particularly masculine.¹⁹ Although female

¹⁸ *La Gran Conquista de Ultramar*, edited by L. Cooper (Bogotá: Publicaciones del Instituto Caro y Cuervo, LI-LIV, 1979). The story of Isomberte is also summarised by Paris in 'La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne'.

¹⁹ See Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' in *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 187-213. Kristeva makes the distinction between cyclical time, monumental time, and linear time. While the first two are linked to female subjectivity, maternity, and repetition, linear time is perceived as the time of language and history, a definition which readily leads to its labelling as masculine. In the context of the Chevalier au Cygne epics Kristeva's essay reinforces the notion of a division between orality, cyclicity and the feminine,

characters do appear in the *Chevalier au Cygne*, their fundamental purpose is to act as conduits for a male lineage whose summit of perfection, in historical, epic, and Christian terms, will be reached in the persona of Godefroi de Bouillon.

In the *Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne* there are two further female characters who also make the transition from the folktale tradition to the twelfth-century *chanson de geste*. These are the mother of the swan-children, who gives her name to the two French versions of the *Naissance* — *Elioxe* or *Beatrix* — and the children's grandmother, mother of Lothair. Again, the treatment and scope of these two characters differs between the various versions of the tale. In general, however, their depiction shows a marked tendency for rationalisation over time, for a shift from the mythological to the epic, from the female and supernatural to the male and chivalric. There is, however, a significant difference between the portrayal of these characters and that of the swan-maiden. All three characters, the swan-maiden, the mother and the grandmother, play an important role in the mythological tradition and are, in their different ways, either written out of the epic versions or play a diminished role here. It is only in the case of the swan-maiden, however, that the female character's gender ceases to be significant. As seen above, her character becomes virtually neuter in *Elioxe*, and is replaced by a male character in *Beatrix*. In contrast, the transition of the mother and grandmother from folktale to epic retains the gender marking of their roles.

In the case of *Elioxe/Beatrix* her gender is essential to her role as mother, and as a mother she is transposed to the epic. This does not take place, however, without a degree of redefinition and transformation as the character evolves from supernatural 'fey' to twelfth-century noblewoman. In the *Elioxe* version, *Elioxe's* supernatural nature is implied from the moment of her meeting with Lothair (ll. 151-274), yet her character is nonetheless constructed to present the epic ideal of womanhood; her destiny is to extend the lineage (ll. 254-67). The encounter between *Elioxe* and Lothair conforms to the narrative scheme of a meeting between

and literature, linearity, and the masculine. This binary opposition should not, however, be regarded as one which structures either the character of literature in general, or that of the Old French *chanson de geste* in particular.

fey and mortal as defined by Laurence Harf-Lancner.²⁰ It takes place in the middle of a forest beside an isolated fountain, where Elixie appears as if by magic from the nearby mountain.

Ez vos une pucele cortoise et avenant,
De la grande montaigne vint illuec descendant,
Ne sai que sa biauté vos alaisse contant;
Bele estoit et bien faite et de parage grant,
Et son manoir avoit ens el mont la devant,
Et puceles laiens por faire son conmant;
Es cavernes del mont la ot abitement. (ll. 160-66)

It is this realm of the supernatural which provides Elixie with status and power. Lothair's entry into her world marks his passage from the masculine sphere of the known world to the sphere of the feminine, depicted as both natural and supernatural. This corresponds to a crossing of the boundary between culture and nature and subjects Lothair to Elixie's rule:

'Sire', dist la pucele, 'bien sanblés de vaillance,
Mais ço wel jo savoir, par quele mesprisance
Entrastes en mon bos? En çou enfance?
J'en porrai, se jo woel, molt tost avoir venjance;
Mi centisme arai tost a escu et a lance,
Se je trovoie en vos ranprosne ne beubance. (ll. 192-97)

Lothair's loss of direction and his fear of attack by wild beasts during his night in the forest (ll. 207-10), also indicate his lack of authority and control in this domain, the domain of the unknown. This enclosed world lacks both the physical marks of civilisation, such as roads, and its linguistic markings — the country is given no name, but is simply defined by Lothair as 'not France' (l. 217). It is only with the assistance of Elixie, here in the position of knowledge and authority, that Lothair can regain the outside world from which he comes:

'Ne sai quel part je sui, ne ne quier pas beubance;
Metés moi al chemin, pucele de vaillance,
Si porterai de vos bone novele en France.' (ll. 215-17)

Their positions will, however, be reversed on the passage of both Lothair and Elixie to the kingdom of France.

Elixie's agreement to marry Lothair brings about her transition from the feminine 'Otherworld' to the outside world which he represents.²¹ Her entry into its social framework,

²⁰ '1) Le héros part de chez lui, seul, ou se trouve séparé de ses compagnons au cours d'une partie de chasse. 2) Il s'enfonce dans la forêt et parvient dans une clarière, souvent près d'un point d'eau. 3) Il découvre une femme merveilleusement belle, seule, qui semble l'attendre' (Laurence Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Âge. Morgane et Mélusine: La Naissance des fées* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1984), p. 113). Harf-Lancner also points out the inclusion of the mountain in the 'espace surnaturel' in literary tradition (p. 187), although regards the overtly supernatural elements of the encounter as having been erased by the author (p. 186).

through her marriage, necessitates her conformity to its norms. Instead of symbolising the unknown and the supernatural, Elixo must take up her predestined place as wife and mother, a shift which necessitates a redefinition of her character. This transition to the masculine sphere is marked by the text's first mention of her name (l. 284). Elixo now belongs to the realm of the known and the quantifiable. The supernatural nature of her character is not, however, completely suppressed by this naming, but remains an underlying trait which underscores her self-sacrifice to duty. Elixo has foreknowledge of her destiny, a divinatory power which Harf-Lancner sees as being of fairy origin:²²

'Escoute encore, rois, si m'oras d'el parler.
 En la premiere nuit après nostre espouser,
 Que vauras vraiment a ma car deliter,
 Jo te di par verté loiaument sans fauser
 Que tu de .VII. enfans me feras encarger:
 Li .VI. en ierent malle, et pucele al vis cler
 Iert li sietismes enfes, co ne puet trespasser.
 Lasse! Moi, j'en morrai de ces enfans porter.
 Et quels talens me prent que jo m'en doie aler
 La u il m'estavra de tele mort pener,
 Mais que teux destinee doit par mi moi passer?
 Et m'estuet travellier et tel mort endurer
 Por le linage acroistre qui ira outre mer,
 Et qui la se fera segnor et roi clamer.'

(ll. 254-67)

Although she possesses divinatory power and is thus aware of her forthcoming death, Elixo is not deterred from becoming first a wife and then a mother. This reflects the twelfth-century perception of marriage and child-bearing as the 'natural' duty of any woman not entering a religious life.²³ Elixo's duty to procreate is essential, and not only in fulfilment of this socio-cultural role. In the context of this particular narrative she will become mother to Lothair's

²¹ As pointed out to me by Philip E. Bennett, the gender-marking of the 'Otherworld' in twelfth-century literature is dependent upon the sex of the main protagonist of the text, the supernatural being its opposite. Thus the lais of 'Lanval' and 'Guigemar', where the hero is male, construct a female Otherworld, whereas the female hero of 'Yonec' is counterbalanced by a supernatural male. In the romance (as opposed to the *lai*) the Otherworld is, however, predominantly female, as the romance protagonist is by definition male. The inscription of the 'Other' as female is also an element of modern feminist theory: see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Picador Classics, Pan Books, 1988) and Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²² Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Age*, p. 187. The supernatural nature of Elixo's children also testifies to the continuing importance of the fairy element in her depiction.

²³ As stated by Georges Duby, the perceived duty of the patriarchal head of a medieval family was: 'de céder les filles, de négocier au mieux leur pouvoir de procréation et les avantages qu'elles sont censées léguer à leur progéniture, d'autre part d'aider les garçons à prendre femme. A la prendre ailleurs, dans une autre maison, à l'introduire dans cette maison-ci [...] où elle va remplir sa fonction primordiale: donner des enfants au groupe d'hommes qui l'accueille, qui la domine et qui la surveille.' (Georges Duby, *Mâle moyen age: de l'amour et autres essais* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), pp. 16-17).

heirs, ensuring a legitimate succession for the kingdom and thus its political stability. In the wider context of the Crusade Cycle, her role as prestigious matriarch of Godefroi de Bouillon's lineage necessitates her depiction as an exemplary character, representative of the feminine ideal. Elioxe thus becomes a kind of *ancilla Dei*, endowed with a status almost analogous to that of the Virgin Mary. This marks the paradoxical relationship between a hero and his ancestors common to so many epic narratives; Godefroi de Bouillon's illustrious forebears heighten and validate his status as leader of the First Crusade and first Latin King of Jerusalem, while it is Godefroi's religious and political significance which ensure the literary construction of his ancestors as an ideal.

It is Elioxe's motherhood which imbues her character with importance in both the mythical and the epic versions of the tale. In the latter, however, she must be presented as the embodiment of the twelfth-century ideal of femininity in order to be viewed as a worthy matriarch of the Bouillon lineage. Her depiction as a princess therefore predominates over her characterisation as a fey. Although her realm is that of the supernatural, the narrator is careful to underscore Elioxe's royal descent and her wealth, as well as her beauty:

‘Li miens pere fu rois et de grant vasselage,
 .IX. cités m’a laisié quites en iretage.
 De .L. castels ai jo le segnorage,
 Et quanqu’il i apent vient tot a mon servage,
 Et voier et maieur tot rendent treñage.’ (ll. 221-25)

Significantly, this description of her inheritance also places Elioxe in a decidedly feudal context: homage is paid to her as to a feudal overlord. The epic thus marks Elioxe as a twelfth-century noblewoman from the very beginning of the text — the point at which she is at her most obviously fey.

Elioxe's journey to the kingdom of France and her subsequent marriage (ll. 281-449) see her taking up the role of queen and mother, a role which from this point on takes precedence over her feyness. Elioxe's inheritance is now presumably brought to Lothair as a dowry, and her authority as a ruler in her own right is negated by her marriage. Again, this shift in power, the subjection of a married woman to her husband, conforms to twelfth-century social practice. In the context of the Crusade Cycle this subjection has further implications, however. Elioxe enters into marriage in full knowledge of her subsequent death in childbirth. Autonomy and

power are replaced by self-sacrifice in the interests of furthering the lineage and extending the boundaries of the Christian kingdom. Elixie is not only placed in a position of social subordination to her husband, but is also textually subordinated to her heroic male descendants. It is her maternity which is of prime importance. Elixie may be constructed as the feminine ideal, beautiful, noble and of 'grant parage', but this is purely in order to ensure that the lineage of the Chevalier au Cygne and of Godefroi de Bouillon is without blemish. The feminine ideal thus becomes progenitor of the masculine, to which it is ultimately sacrificed with the death of Elixie as she gives birth to the Chevalier au Cygne and his six siblings.²⁴

In the *Beatrix* version of the *Naissance*, Beatrix does not die in childbirth, but is wrongfully accused of adultery and bestiality by her mother-in-law and is imprisoned. Apart from the replacement of death by imprisonment, Beatrix's role is fundamentally the same as that of Elixie. It is her maternity which is of paramount importance, and which functions as a form of sacrifice. Beatrix's persecution has the added effect of heightening the impression of her nobility, strength, and patience, reinforcing her suitability as ancestress of Godefroi de Bouillon.²⁵ Her imprisonment also focuses attention on the chivalric qualities of her son, the Chevalier au Cygne, who now takes on the central, heroic role. Elias leaves his childhood world of the forest and takes up arms in order to act as Beatrix's champion as she is about to be put to death. It is through his prowess that she is redeemed and reinstated to her royal position, rather than through any effort of her own, or through any belated recognition of her virtuous nature.²⁶ The separate fates of Elixie and Beatrix are both found in the mythological tradition, and were presumably drawn from different variations of the oral folktale.²⁷

²⁴ It is significant in terms of the continuation of the male blood-line that the Chevalier au Cygne does not leave any male heir, but only a daughter, Ida, who will become mother to Godefroi de Bouillon: 'le chevalier au cygne est inséparable d'une figure héroïque, celle du premier avoué de Jerusalem. Celle-ci ne doit pas être éclipsée par celle d'un fils de l'homme fée. Godefroi sera donc le premier descendant mâle du chevalier au cygne' (Harf-Lancner, *Les fées au Moyen Age*, p. 184).

²⁵ The 'persecuted innocent' was a distinct female literary type in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Other examples include *Parise la Duchesse* and Philippe de Beaumanoir's *Manekine*.

²⁶ Here *Beatrix* is marked out from the other women of the 'persecuted innocent' tradition, who are reinstated into the social order when their intrinsic moral worth is recognised.

²⁷ 'Chacune des versions écrites suppose la connaissance des versions antérieures et en outre de versions orales différentes' (Lods, 'L'utilisation des thèmes mythiques', p. 819).

However, it is only in the *chanson de geste* that the character of the mother is sacrificed to the genealogical imperative of a lineage defined in terms of Christian heroism and conquest.

The final female character to be considered here is that of the grandmother of the swan-children: Matrosilie in the *Elioxe* version, and Matabrune in the *Beatrix*. Again, it is *Elioxe* which provides the focus of the following study. The malevolent character of the grandmother makes the transition from folktale to epic virtually unimpaired, and her role is instrumental in structuring both types of narrative. Of all the female characters of *Elioxe*, it is Matrosilie who has the most profound influence on the course of narrative events, and who appears as the most powerful. She, like the other characters, is set into the context of twelfth-century aristocratic society, where she acts out her role of *mater familias*. Matrosilie's concern for her son to contract a politically and economically advantageous marriage leads Jeanne Lods to refer to her as 'une mère presque bourgeoise', a perception which underscores Matrosilie's social role.²⁸ In addition to political expediency, her reaction to Lothair's projected marriage may also be regarded as expressing a maternal concern for his welfare:

'Bels fiux, que penses tu? Nel fai sifaitement!
 Tu ne prendras feme ensi soudainement.
 Jo te queraï oisor tot al los de no gent.
 Ci pres maint Anotars qui a grant tenement,
 Rois est de grant puissance s'a maint rice parent' (ll. 360-4)

Social duty and maternal concern may be read into Matrosilie's words, yet the notion of Lothair's mother as conforming to any kind of maternal ideal is swiftly belied by the evil nature of her later actions and the consequences which these have upon her son.²⁹

A certain dualism is apparent throughout Matrosilie's depiction. In terms of genre, she is a stereotypically 'wicked stepmother' type, of the kind often found in folktales, but in the *Naissance* is nonetheless pressed into the mould of a twelfth-century matron.³⁰ Her personal duplicity is manifested in a split between the public and the private, as her speech and public

²⁸ Lods, 'L'utilisation des thèmes mythiques', p. 812.

²⁹ The text nods at various points towards a harmonious mother-son relationship existing between Matrosilie and Lothair. Matrosilie kisses Lothair in greeting upon his return with Elioxe (l. 341), and before her confession reminds him of the filial duty and honour which he owes her (ll. 2773-77). In turn, Lothair entrusts Elioxe to his mother when he leaves for battle (ll. 718-20), and also entrusts her with his daughter once the swan-children have been united with their father (ll. 3025-27).

³⁰ See *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*, edited by Stith Thomson (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1955-58).

actions conform to a maternal norm, while her private machinations work against it. This is nowhere more evident than in her words to Lothair as he departs for battle, leaving the pregnant Elïoxe in his mother's care:

La mere vint atant, ne s'atarga noient,
 Si a dit a son fil molt amiablement:
 'Fiux, jo t'ainc autretant con moi, mien escient,
 Et qui tu ameras, amerai le ensemment;
 Se j'ai de toi neveu, joie et devinement
 Avra tos jors de moi, et esbanoïement.' (ll. 738-43)

These professions of love project an image of caring motherhood which is proved completely false once her grandchildren are born. As soon as Elïoxe has been buried (l. 1288), Matrosilie orders her liegeman to prepare two large baskets, then to carry their contents into the forest and abandon them (ll. 1305-39). This attempt to bring about the death of all of Lothair's children (who are, of course, contained in the baskets) is a crime in many more ways than one. The attempted murder of her son's children is legally crime, but is also a crime against nature. As pointed out by the narrator, who reinforces his statement with an appeal to customary wisdom:³¹

Mainte fois en proverbe selt li vilains retraire
 Que taie norist sot; ceste fait le contraire:
 Ne nourist sot ne sage, car ele est de put aire;
 Ains ocit et destruit, nen velt noreçon faire.
 Double mere est la taie quant ele est de bon aire,
 Mais des enfans son fil set molt bien mordre faire; (ll. 1319-24)

Matrosilie's actions also constitute a social crime, as it is the legitimate heirs of France whom she attempts to destroy. In the context of the Christian epic, the grandmother's evil has an even greater import, for the lineage which she threatens is that of Godefroi de Bouillon, future king of Jerusalem.

Matrosilie's feminine gender is of considerable importance in the representation of her character. The private/public dichotomy of her behaviour is clearly indicative of the two faces of femininity prevalent in twelfth-century ideology.³² The notion of the grandmother as being

³¹ See *Li Proverbe au Vilain: Die Sprichwörter des Gemeinen Mannes. Altfranzösische Dichtung*, edited by Adolf Tobler (Leipzig: 1895) for popular medieval sayings and beliefs.

³² See *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, edited by Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); *Three Medieval Views of Women*, edited by Gloria K. Fiero, Wendy Pfeffer and Mathé Allain (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989).

a ‘double mere’ (l. 1323), and the image of the supportive mother which Matrosilie projects constitute an ideal. This is the role which Elixoe fulfils. Her self-sacrifice subordinates her to the demands of the narrative’s patrilineage and to the higher demands of epic lineage and Christian mythography. Although Matrosilie articulates a similar desire to act out a role which is supportive both of family and of lineage, her words are belied by her actions, as seen above. It is these actions which then present the counter-image of womankind.³³ Although lacking in any clear psychological motivation, unless this is simply an overwhelming hatred of her daughter-in-law, Matrosilie’s behaviour illustrates the stereotypically ‘feminine’ traits of jealousy, greed, and deviousness.³⁴ The fact that Matrosilie is a mother also serves to set her firmly into a female role, although in contrast to Elixoe, Matrosilie’s role is not one which is dominated by her motherhood. This maternal sphere, the one designated as most socially and ideologically desirable for any woman not entering into holy orders, is rejected by Matrosilie. Instead of becoming a surrogate mother on the death of Elixoe, Matrosilie transgresses against both the social and the natural order. Nurture is replaced by death and destruction (ll. 1319-24). Although the attempted murder of her new-born grandchildren marks Matrosilie as ‘unnatural’, a contradiction of the maternal norm, the concept is here ambivalent and unstable. At the same time Matrosilie is in fact acting true to nature, to a female nature which renders her perverse and malevolent and which constitutes a threat both to men and to their offspring.³⁵

As a force for evil, Matrosilie embodies a source of subversion. Socially subversive simply through her rejection of the nurturing role ideologically assigned to women, it is Matrosilie’s attempt to destroy the royal male lineage which most strongly marks her as seditious. As seen above, this attempt on the life of the Chevalier au Cygne and his siblings has a further genealogical significance in the context of the Crusade Cycle as a whole. In view of the primacy of Godefroi de Bouillon’s ancestry, Matrosilie’s destructive impulse cannot succeed.

³³ The same story of the vindictive mother-in-law also appears in Beaumanoir’s *Le Manekine*, while the *fabliaux* present a range of female characters who display the undesirable qualities supposedly innate to women.

³⁴ Matrosilie reveals her jealousy of Elixoe by the attempted murder of her children (ll. 1328-36); greed by her theft of their gold chains (ll. 1933-35); and a general duplicity in her interaction with her son.

³⁵ See Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s ‘De Secretis Mulierum’ with Commentaries*, edited by Helen Rodnite Lemay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). This natural scientific text comprises a mixture of medical theory and misogynistic rhetoric, testifying to the dangers presented to men by the female body and its reproductive function.

Although her character is a potential threat to the social and patrilinear continuum, this threat inevitably remains bounded and contained. The grandmother of the folktale equally does not succeed in bringing about the death of her grandchildren, but in the case of Matrosilie it is the fact that she operates in a context dependent on the creation of a genealogical mythistory which dictates the outcome of her actions.

In the *Naissance* Matrosilie's epic framing can therefore be seen to limit her scope for subversion. In addition to the strictures imposed by the need to establish an ancestry for Godefroi de Bouillon, the social context of *Elixo* also sets certain limitations. As seen above, the wicked grandmother of the myth is glossed as a twelfth-century matriarch. Matrosilie's social status as a woman is thus subordinate to that of her son, the head of the patriarchal household.³⁶ In addition, she is revealed as emotionally subordinate to Lothair, not through love, but through fear:

Tant con ses fils est fors est ele et dame et maire,
Mais s'il fust en maison, n'osast por son viaire
Mostrer son felon cuer, qui est de mal afaire (ll. 1325-7)

Matrosilie is therefore constrained by her position in the social and familial network. Lothair is placed in authority over her, and her social and maternal duty lies towards him. This contemporary ideal would have been an ever-present factor in the audience's perception of Matrosilie's character. Her rejection of the ties which should bind her to Lothair, both as her son and as the king, to his children, and to the interests of the kingdom increases the impression of her deep moral turpitude.

Matrosilie's evil nature cannot be openly manifested, but must act covertly. The split between speech and silence is important here. As already seen, Matrosilie's public persona conceals her 'true nature'. The image of herself which she presents through her speech is calculated to conform to the prevailing feminine ideal. This verbal image is thus one which echoes the dominant ideological discourse of twelfth-century society and epic, playing on the notion of a female role which is construed as supportive of, and subordinate to, a male homosocial

³⁶ In the *Livre des Manières* (c. 1174-78), by Etienne de Fougères, 'women' are treated as an undifferentiated social category and are placed in final position, considered after the lowest male estates: *Le Livre des Manières*, edited by Anthony R. Lodge (Geneva: Droz, 1979). See also Georges Duby, *Le Chevalier, la femme et le prêtre: le mariage dans la France féodale* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), and Duby, *Mâle moyen âge*, for details of the position of a married woman in the medieval family structure.

system. The public speech act is a means of framing and containing. In a similar way, the naming of Elixie establishes her public identity and sets her firmly in a cultural context dominated by language.³⁷ According to Adrienne Rich, 'In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence'.³⁸ Matrosilie may be oppressed into silence and secrecy, but this does not mean, however, that she lacks power. It is silence which enables her subversive actions to be initially effective. The women attendant on the birth of the swan-children are sworn to secrecy:

'Plevissiés ça vos fois que c'ert cose celee,
N'a home ne a feme qui de mere soit nee
Ne sera ceste cose ja par vos revelee.' (ll. 1299-1301)

And so is the liegeman who takes the children into the forest to abandon them (ll. 1308-10).³⁹ This subversive silence is finally broken by Matrosilie's confession to Lothair (ll. 2783-2840), the private here becoming public as Matrosilie's evil is revealed in words as well as in deeds. From the point of her confession, Matrosilie appears to accept the nurturing, maternal role which she formerly rejected. Indeed, she becomes an exemplary grandmother, completely rehabilitated into the social framework of the epic. In addition to providing contributions for the knighting ceremony of the male swan-children (ll. 3161-63; 3212-13), she is also entrusted with the care of Lothair's daughter (ll. 3025-27), a move which seems particularly strange given the outcome of Matrosilie's 'care' of Elixie. Apart from these brief mentions, however, the grandmother plays no further role in the tale. Matrosilie's silence, however, now appears ambiguous. The little that is revealed about her actions would seem to imply her conformity to her approved social role, and her speech is no longer composed of fabrications and lies. Conformity to the social norm now appears to take place through deeds instead of through speech. It is Matrosilie's silence, however, which forces the question of her fundamental transformation to remain open. Matrosilie's previous public silence as to her perfidy and the silence which cloaked her machinations lend an ambiguity to her later lack of speech. The

³⁷ The perception of society and language as masculine constructs, operating as aspects of the Lacanian Symbolic, is an area which cannot be fully explored here. It is, however, important to note the significance of the link between language and the masculine in modern feminist theory. The problematic nature of women's access to a language of authority and the expression of female subjectivity is a primary issue in the work of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray.

³⁸ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose: 1966-78* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 204. Quoted in Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Pandora Press, Harper Collins, 1992), p.59.

³⁹ The abandonment of children in the forest is a widespread folk-motif, see *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, but it also appears in literary form, e.g. *Tristan*, and Marie de France's 'Fresne'.

notion of the grandmother as a potential source of malevolence and disruption is thus one which continues in the mind of the audience. Although her character disappears from the narrative, Matrosilie still remains a powerful image of negative femininity which cannot easily be dispelled.

In the *Beatrix* version of the *Naissance*, the grandmother is named Matabrune and basically plays the same role as that of Matrosilie in *Elioxe*.⁴⁰ The difference here is that Matabrune's daughter-in-law continues to live following the birth of the swan-children, and thus provides the grandmother with an additional focus for her hatred. Matabrune not only deceives her son as to the nature of his offspring, but also accuses *Beatrix* of bestiality and demands that she be put to death (*Beatrix*, ll. 216-23).⁴¹ Matabrune's confession is not followed by any ambiguous 'conversion'. Instead, her wickedness is emphasised by her execution and by the fact that her soul is snatched away by the devil (*Beatrix*, ll. 2528-29). Silence does not function in the same way in the depiction of Matabrune as it does in that of Matrosilie, as the former's vilification of Beatrix is quite apparent. Matabrune's death then removes any question of her continuing subversion.

To return to *Elioxe*, it is the character of Matrosilie, of all three of the female characters considered here, whose depiction is the most obviously problematic. Although Matrosilie's narrative function is the same as that of the grandmother of the myth, her character has an additional significance in *Elioxe*. As emphasised throughout this paper, the establishment of a worthy ancestry for Godefroi de Bouillon is a paramount concern in the *Naissance*. The characterisation of the Chevalier au Cygne's grandmother as the embodiment of female evil and the source of the lineage's potential destruction does not sit easily in a narrative founded on genealogical supremacy. Matrosilie's social rehabilitation is a lurch in the epic's coherence

⁴⁰ It is worth noting that there is an emphasis on death inherent in both the names applied to the grandmother characters, Matrosilie and Matabrune. While 'Matrosilie' may imply (step)motherhood, owing to the link between the initial element 'Matr-' and 'mater', its second element, '-silie', is derived from 'sillier', 'to destroy'. 'Matabrune' is a Saracen-type name composed of the negative elements 'Mat-' (death) and '-brune' (dark). See André Moisan, *Répertoire des noms propres de personnes et de lieux cités dans les chansons de geste françaises et les ouvrages étrangers dérivées* (Geneva: Droz, 1986), pp. 696-97 for listings of similar Saracen names, e.g. Matalie, Matamar, Matefelon.

⁴¹ The accusation of bestiality stems from the fact that Matabrune informs her son that Beatrix gave birth to seven dogs. According to medieval belief, the physical nature of the father would be reflected in his child and multiple births indicated intercourse with several partners. In order to produce dogs Beatrix must therefore have had intercourse with dogs.

which appears neither comprehensible nor likely in terms of psychology of character. It does, however, produce a *dénouement* which brings Matrosilie more into line with the genealogical imperative of the text.

In conclusion, the female characters of the *Naissance*, in particular *Elioxe*, retain a certain measure of their mythological import and characterisation, in varying degrees. They are all, however, subject to the influence of the epic's twelfth-century framework. More importantly, it is the synthesis of the myth of the swan-children and the legend of the Chevalier au Cygne, epic ancestor of Godefroi de Bouillon, which produces significant alterations in the definition and role of the female characters. The role of the swan-maiden is suppressed in a genealogical frame which emphasises the male lineage, while her mother, *Elioxe*, is sacrificed to the demands of this lineage. Even the character of Matrosilie, who poses a powerful threat to the lineage's future, undergoes a radical change which appears to render her ultimately harmless. With the retransformation of the Chevalier au Cygne and the containment of the threat posed by Matrosilie, the content of the narrative becomes more emphatically epic. This shift in tone prepares the way for the second epic of the cycle, the *Chevalier au Cygne*, and ultimately for his illustrious descendant, Godefroi de Bouillon.